

This Means War by **Luddleston**

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Summary:

In order to avoid having to spend the summer with his father, Zagreus volunteers at the summer camp his mother runs, and quickly discovers that the two halves of the camp aren't just locked in a friendly competition.

It's an all-out battle.

Or: the Trojan War, but summer camp.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Do you wanna know the entire goddamn reason this fic exists?

It's because I watched Troy (2004) and realized all the Trojans are wearing tie-dyed outfits.

And because I love writing summer camp AUs because I want to relive the good parts of being a camp counselor and not the weird Jesus parts of the particular camp I worked at. ANYWAYS. Enjoy this nonsense.

Dear Than,

Summer camp has been fun.

Well, and not fun.

Mostly, it's just been weird.

And if I keep writing one sentence per line, I'm going to run out of notebook paper. Which I have to use to write to you because cell phones don't work out here. Anyway.

I thought this was going to be a good time and all, getting to see Mother, not having to be stuck dealing with Father all summer. As it turns out, I maybe should have just hid in your house until school starts back up instead. How long do you think it would take Nyx to notice me?

It's not that bad! I like hanging out with Mother at the nature center. She has a lot of snakes and a turtle and a guinea pig. There are also horses at the barn, but those scare me a little. I just don't understand why they tolerate people riding them, and I think they would probably sense my fear and kick me off.

Anyway, the weird part about this camp is the summers-long blood feud.

Yeah.

So, the camp is split into two halves, the Greek side and the Trojan side, and there's a lake between them. But they share the activities and the dining hall and everything else, it's just the cabins that are separate. I normally hang out on the Greek side because that's where the extra cabin is—where the people who aren't in charge of any children stay, and I'm not technically employed by the camp so I can't be in charge of any children.

And the two sides HATE each other.

I have no idea why.

But I have been asked to participate in a camp-wide game of Capture The Flag and the Greek counselors seem quite happy about that because I'm apparently going to win it for them. I guess because I'm fast?

Well, we'll see.

Anyway, hope you're enjoying THE DRAMA. Also, hey, have you ever thought about volunteering at a summer camp?

Because I MISS YOU!!!!

I'll write you again as long as Agamemnon doesn't kill me.

Give Cerberus many kisses for me. I'll know if you didn't.

Love,

Zag

Love.

Hm.

Zagreus supposed this was an ordinary way to end a letter, but should he really? What if Than thought it was weird?

He'd definitely notice if Zagreus crossed out the 'love' and wrote something else instead. Maybe if he drew some giant hearts around it, Than would take it as a joke. Because that's what it was, of course. A joke. Or a normal way to end a letter. One of the two.

He was still debating when the picnic table shook because somebody sat down on top of it instead of at the bench like a normal person.

"Hello there, stranger."

The man who joined him was someone that he recognized as sitting on the Greeks' side of the dining hall. He was broad-shouldered and dark-skinned and wore a beard despite the fact that nothing was air conditioned and it was approximately a million degrees every day, but he did have his hair pulled back into a bun to relieve some of the heat.

"Oh, hi." Zagreus felt a sudden urge to cover up his letter, lest he reveal that he was sharing inside information with an unknown foreign power. Or, you know, his best friend from school. "You're the archery instructor, aren't you? I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name..."

He only shrugged. "I've forgotten yours, too. I'm Patroclus."

"Zagreus. Or, Zag. I'm Persephone's son, uh, so, I've just been helping out around the place for the past couple of days."

That got a look of recognition. There were few people who were equally respected by both sides of the camp. Persephone, being the Camp Director, and therefore in charge of both halves, was one of them. Zagreus figured that as her son, he would be above the feud also, but the Greeks seemed to have claimed him for themselves.

"Can I ask you something, Patroclus?" Zagreus tapped his pen against his notebook as he spoke.

"You just did. But yes, you can ask me something else."

It was difficult to tell whether Patroclus was joking or if he was genuinely annoyed. Zagreus chose to take it as a joke, and plowed on ahead. "What's with this rivalry between the Greeks and the Trojans? I mean, I understand a couple of water balloon fights, but yesterday Agamemnon was training the campers for capture the flag like he was putting them through boot camp."

Patroclus leaned back, making the ancient picnic table creak. "Oh, you don't want to know that story," he said. "And between you and me, Agamemnon wishes this was actually boot camp."

"I do want to know that story!" Zagreus protested, slapping his palm down on his notebook for emphasis.

"What story?" They were joined, then, by another man, who flung an arm around Patroclus' shoulders and leaned on him as he peered down at Zagreus. He did recognize this newcomer, because Achilles was the reason everyone was putting their faith in Zagreus so much for capture the flag. Apparently, Achilles had gone a little too hard at last week's capture the flag game and had rolled his ankle. Which, apparently, he did every summer.

"The story of why we're fighting," Patroclus said, ducking out from under Achilles' arm. "Ugh. Why are you so sweaty? You weren't even climbing."

"Oh, I was. I just didn't use my feet." He sat down next to Zagreus, his braced foot sticking out awkwardly and his crutches dropping to the ground with a clatter. "Zagreus, right? Why, has nobody told you?"

Zagreus flipped his notebook shut. He'd already seen one of the other counselors be viciously mocked for writing a letter to his girlfriend back home. "Nope."

"It's a long and very stupid story," Patroclus said, "and I don't want to spend my break telling it. Come on, Achilles. Are we still going to the lake?"

"No, no, he deserves to know," Achilles said. "It wouldn't do for our young Zagreus to not be educated. He's still catching up, missed the first couple weeks and all."

Patroclus rolled his eyes.

"It all began two summers ago, when Menelaus started dating Helen." Achilles told the story not as someone detailing a grand tale around a campfire but as someone who'd already had to tell this to at least three new people and was tired of it.

"Helen, the girl who works in the front office?" Zagreus remembered little of her, aside from the fact that she was fairly nice and extremely pretty.

Achilles nodded. "That's the one. Anyway, they were together almost all summer, but then Menelaus found out she was cheating on him with Paris. He's one of the Trojans, in case you were wondering. So, there was a whole fight, and it continued all last year and is still going this year, too."

"Who's winning?" Zagreus asked, although it didn't totally feel like either party could win in a situation like this.

Patroclus sighed at length. "Who knows?"

"Well, the camp awards points for competitive activities, but those are split pretty evenly." Achilles started counting them off on his fingers. "They always win the obstacle course, we always win dodgeball. They've got the kayak race, Patroclus cheats at archery—"

"I don't cheat. I simply count my points for us instead of for them when I'm demonstrating. But if you *want* me to start counting my score for them, I suppose I can."

He probably shouldn't have been counting his points during the demonstration at all, Zagreus thought.

"In any case, the only real toss-up is capture the flag," Achilles finished. Zagreus hadn't realized his position was quite so dire.

"We win if Achilles doesn't roll his ankle, but he managed to do that the first week of camp, so we lost pretty badly last week."

Achilles popped the cap on his water bottle open so that he could spray it in Patroclus' direction. "They win if Hector and all his many brothers decide to play dirty."

"When is this game, even?" Zagreus asked, wondering if he could suddenly come down with something or manage to be unavailable at that particular time. Maybe his mother would come up with some chores for him to do that would prevent his attendance.

"Wednesday night," Patroclus said. "At nine P.M."

Apparently he had two days' time to prepare. "Won't it get dark too fast?" Sneaking out of this game wouldn't work, he certainly wouldn't have any conflicting responsibilities at that hour.

Achilles laughed, loud and bold. "That's the point," he explained, "it's a nighttime operation."

Zagreus suddenly understood how Achilles managed to screw up his ankle so badly.

— — —

His mother was singing something sweet but quite off-key when Zagreus arrived.

The nature center was a part of the camp that was not often visited by staff outside of activities that involved letting their campers observe the animals, mostly because if one loitered around, Persephone would put them to work. Zagreus didn't mind, especially because he felt distinctly unhelpful when doing anything around the other counselors, who were all good enough at their jobs that they didn't need the assistance of the camp director's son. No matter when he arrived here, there was always a fish tank that could use a good cleaning or an animal that needed tended to.

Plus, he got to spend time with his mother while he did it, and that was always a good thing. He hardly saw her during the school year, and during the summers she was always so busy, Zagreus had just decided to go where she was for once instead of asking her to come to Father's home.

She was in her element here, in a green and white tie-dyed T-shirt with the camp logo, her hair pulled up into a haphazard braid. The nature center also served as Persephone's office, and she was currently going through a lot of paperwork that Zagreus would have found very boring. Zagreus was assisting by giving the guinea pig a chance to exercise (rather: this was the excuse Zagreus was using to play with the guinea pig rather than getting anything constructive done).

"How have you been faring, Zagreus?" she asked, looking over the top of the reading glasses she wore while she was doing all of the paperwork business. "I told the boys to take it easy on you, but they're notoriously bad at it."

"Oh, they're alright," Zagreus said, picking up a piece of hay to feed to the guinea pig. The tips of his ears went red at the idea of his mother telling 'the boys' to take it easy on him. "They're just a bit overly competitive. And by that, I mean they're entirely over-competitive, Mother, did you know about this whole rivalry?"

"Of course. It's how we inspire team spirit!"

"It's how Agamemnon inspires war crimes."

"What?" When she took off her glasses entirely, placing them upside-down on her stack of papers, Zagreus knew he had her full attention. "It's not that bad, is it?"

"All I know is, they've been extra horrible this year because Paris stole Menalaeus' girlfriend. At least, that's what Achilles said—but he also told me there's a three-headed dog that eats campers who are up after bedtime, so I'm not certain how legitimate his claims are." He looked at the wall instead of at her as he spoke, taking in the details of the hand-painted forest scene Persephone had decorated the inside of the nature center with.

Persephone hummed, tapping her pen against the desk. "Zagreus," she said, slowly, after a moment. "Would you perhaps mind... keeping an eye on them for me?"

"Yes?"

"It's just..." she sighed, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair. "They never do this sort of nonsense in front of me. Of course they wouldn't. But I'd like to know what's going on, and whether it's possible to stop things from getting out of hand without cancelling the entire competition."

"You're asking me to spy for you," Zagreus said, scooping up the guinea pig, who was getting dangerously close to wandering beneath the rack with all the animal feed.

"If you want to call it that." She smiled, because she knew Zagreus *would* want to call it that. "Just let me know what they've been up to, all right? And don't hurt yourself during that capture the flag game, goodness knows the nurse has enough to deal with."

"Maybe if you just made them stop playing capture the flag after dark," Zagreus said.

"Oh, I could never do that." She replaced her glasses. "I was the one who told my mother we should start playing after dark, can't go back on it now."

2. Chapter 2

Impartial though he may have attempted to be, Zagreus found himself cursing whatever *definitely Trojan interference* had him running around all of camp Tuesday morning.

Okay, so maybe Patroclus just hadn't shown back up after his break for normal reasons. Whatever those were. But he was as punctual as a camp counselor with a watch that was sometimes a few minutes off could be, so Zagreus highly doubted he'd up and vanished without a reason. And the reason? Trojans, probably.

He ran all the way from the trailhead for the archery range to the rock-climbing wall at the opposite end of camp, wondering if perhaps Patroclus was with Achilles. At the very least, Achilles would likely know where Patroclus was, considering the fact that they had each other's schedules memorized. Zagreus wondered if they knew one another before they'd started working here. They seemed quite close.

Here, he found something even more concerning: Achilles was also missing.

"I think they were supposed to be hanging out on break," said the person at the bottom of the rock wall, whose name Zagreus did not remember. She shouted up to the top, which required quite a set of lungs. "BRI! WHERE'S ACHILLES?"

The returning shout was almost impossible to hear. "*I don't know! I don't keep track of him!*"

"Isn't he supposed to be working here right now?" Zagreus asked, at as high a volume as he could, so that she might hear him up there.

"*He's supposed to be at the high ropes course! In the woods!*" called the person at the top of the tower, who Zag could only see as a pair of feet dangling over the edge.

Her partner at the bottom of the tower sighed. "He probably headed that way with Pat. You should have passed them on your way up here, though."

She was correct. There was only one path straight through the middle of camp, aside from the little offshoots that led to the cabins, and Zag hadn't seen them anywhere along it. *An ambush*, Zagreus thought, and then shook his head, because that idea was ridiculous. "Alright. I suppose I'll head down that way."

He stole a drink of water from the enormous cooler at the base of the tower before racing back down the path through the center of camp. At least he wouldn't be out of shape when track started back up in the fall.

Zagreus was sweating and wondering if he should duck into his cabin for a change of shirt when he heard a thump from inside the equipment shed at the lake. The equipment shed was actually quite large, as it held a rack of canoe paddles, enough life jackets to outfit an army of children plus their adult supervision, and whatever else the lifeguards had left there for the day. Usually, the doors at either end were open, so you could see through it and out the other side, but today (probably because nobody was at the lake) the doors were shut. At least, the one facing Zagreus was shut.

He darted around to the other side, which was also closed, and heard something that sounded like voices inside. Zagreus tried to slide the door open, but found that the padlock, which he'd never actually seen in use, was slid through the lock to keep it shut.

Huh.

Well, Zagreus did have a copy of the master key, which hopefully worked on the locks on the shed as well.

It popped open, and he pulled the padlock off, hooking it back through one side of the lock mechanism once the door was open. He rolled the door aside, where it squeaked on its tracks, and squinted into the darkness, not quite able to determine what was person and what was life-jacket.

"Hello?"

"Zagreus?" The voice was familiar, if a little out of breath.

"Achilles! That is you, right? I've been looking for—" He took a step forward into the equipment shed and immediately tripped on something. "Wait, did someone lock you in?"

"We very well could not have locked ourselves in." That particular derisiveness could only be Patroclus.

"Oh, good, you're both here. Well, who locked you in, then?" Zagreus tripped again, stopped trying to progress through the shed, and backed out to wait for the two of them to emerge instead. It took them a moment, shuffling through the dark as they were, although they probably had the advantage of their eyes having adjusted to the lack of light.

"Hector." Achilles spat the name. When he stepped out of the shed, he was looking just as overheated as Zagreus, probably because the equipment shed would be an oven in the summer heat, even beneath the trees that surrounded the lake.

Also.

"Achilles, your shirt's on backwards," Zagreus noted. "And inside-out."

"So it is," Patroclus said, flicking the tag that stuck out at the front of Achilles' shirt.

"How did Hector shove you in the equipment shed?" Zagreus was hard-pressed to imagine either of them being tossed into a hiding place like a stereotypical nerd being pushed into a locker.

"Oh, we were already in the equipment shed," Achilles said, a bit muffled because he was stripping off his shirt and replacing it right-side-out and forward.

"For what?" Neither of them were lifeguards.

"Equipment," said Patroclus, with no other explanation.

"I suppose they're missing us at the trailhead," Achilles said, reaching up to pull his hair into a ponytail. "Ugh. I hope they didn't leave without me. I'm not walking all the way out to high ropes."

Zagreus followed Patroclus, who was already headed in the direction of the trailhead, looking over his shoulder at Achilles behind them. "Well, you probably shouldn't, what with your ankle and—uh, Achilles."

"What?"

"You might want to leave your hair down," Zagreus suggested. "That is an enormous hickey."

Patroclus considered him, too. "Hm. Maybe you ought to keep it up. Let Hector know how much we enjoyed his little prank."

"God, no." Achilles shook his hair out, leaving him looking slightly disheveled but unsuspecting as they approached the trailhead, where a group was waiting for them. "I'm not having a bunch of campers ask me what's on my neck. Oh, good, they haven't left."

...Huh.

They really were quite close.

— — —

Colluding with the enemy. Traitorous actions. Betrayal in the making.

That's what Agamemnon would probably accuse Zagreus of if he knew that Zag was headed over to the Trojan side of camp just after lunch, while they stopped back at their cabins to prepare for whatever activity the afternoon held for them.

From the amount of times Zag heard Hector yell at them not to forget bug spray, it seemed like it was something in the woods.

After a third reminder to put on bug spray and a cloud of chemicals released into the air that was most certainly large enough to destroy any bug within a

hundred yards, Hector turned his attention back to Zagreus. "Sorry, what were you asking about?"

"I asked if you were Paris' brother?"

"Yes." Hector, while no more physically intimidating than some of the Greeks (Ajax in particular was probably twice Hector's size), was unnerving in that he almost never blinked. "Who are you again?"

"Persephone's son," Zagreus said, hoping that invoking his mother would convince Hector to listen to him. "Anyway, I wanted to ask what you thought of this whole... war, thing. Isn't it sort of, I mean. Hasn't it gotten blown out of proportion a bit?"

Hector still did not blink. "Odysseus let one of the ponies into our cabin in the middle of the night, so, yes, it probably has."

"How do you know that was Odysseus?"

"Seems like something Odysseus would do." Hector glanced in the direction of the cabin, probably determining whether he had to shout about bug spray again. "Shifty bastard," he muttered.

Perhaps Hector would not be quite as reasonable as Zag took him for. "And so you locked two of the Greek counselors in the equipment shed? That feels like a bit more of a reaction that needed, I mean... it could have thrown off the whole... activity... schedule—Hector, would you please stop looking at me like you're going to rip my head off?"

"Stop saying things that make me want to rip your head off, then."

Zagreus sighed. "Listen. What has to be done to make this right?"

Hector crossed his arms, still staring Zagreus down like this was about to turn into a fight. "Get Menaleus to apologize."

"For what, exactly?" Wasn't Menelaus the wounded party in all of this?

"For overreacting and freaking out when his girlfriend broke up with him for Paris." He frowned, shaking his head, and batted at a passing mosquito. Maybe he needed to take his own advice re: bug spray. "Listen. I know you're in high school, but all of us are adults. And adults shouldn't start enormous fights *at their workplace* because someone breaks up with them and starts dating someone else. It's camp. It happens. People date and break up all the time. Menaleus needs to stop acting like this is the tenth grade. No offense."

"None taken," said Zagreus, who had just finished eleventh grade and therefore could not be offended by the comparison anyway.

"Gotta get everyone to archery," Hector said, in order that he might end the conversation.

"Sure. Right. Good luck!"

"We never win. Pat cheats." Hector turned, leaving Zagreus with a different, new problem.

"So I've heard."

— — —

The camp's conference room was supposed to be used for... well, Zagreus wasn't sure. Visiting dignitaries, perhaps? The occasions when his grandmother dropped by?

The point was, it was supposed to be used for higher purposes than counselors hanging out there on break because the conference room was adjacent to the dining hall, AKA the only place in camp with air conditioning. According to Odysseus, the conference room was also stocked with the only good coffee in the whole place, but Zagreus had no opinion because he didn't drink coffee.

It was a relief, though, to sink into one of the comfortable, office-like chairs in the conference room and close his eyes for just a moment. He'd been on dinner cleanup, and, being the youngest person "working" for the camp, he

got stuck with all the worst jobs. If he never had to operate an industrial dishwasher again, that would be great. He wasn't even going to think about the camp tradition of everyone dumping their unfinished drinks into one bucket (thankfully, there was some weird guy on Zag's cleanup shift who actually liked emptying those out into the puddle outside the back door of the kitchen).

He could go participate in whatever evening game was happening, but he'd heard it was dodgeball and had no desire to get into a close-quarters, projectile-flinging fight with the Trojans, whether or not the Greeks would *definitely win* (Agamemnon's words). Besides, they'd be fine without him. Ajax could probably win it for them himself.

He'd join back up with them for the campfire. It felt safer: a separate fire pit at each cabin circle, no danger of conflict.

The door to the conference room swung open—no surprise, several staff members had their breaks during games or other big group activities where not as much supervision was needed. From the sound of the footsteps, Zagreus could identify Achilles without even opening his eyes—nobody else used crutches, unless there had been another debilitating injury he didn't know about.

"No, you don't just *burn* them, you savage." Patroclus was with him, unsurprisingly.

"It's faster!" Achilles protested.

"It's *barbaric*."

"You make me one, then."

"Ah, so this was a clever ploy to get me to make you a s'more, was it?" Apparently, they were arguing about marshmallows. Pat dropped into the seat directly across from Zagreus, shaking his head as he bemoaned Achilles' opinion. "Settle this for us, stranger: how do you properly roast a marshmallow?"

"Burn it," said Zagreus, just to see Patroclus roll his eyes. Achilles reached over and ruffled Zag's hair, cheering him on.

"You're both wrong," Patroclus sighed, tipping his head back and staring at the wood-beam ceiling above them. This was not the part of the ceiling where somebody had written 'gullible'. "Anyway. Zagreus. Hector tells me you dropped by his cabin before archery."

Zagreus should have expected this to happen. Despite the great divide between the two halves of camp, Hector and Patroclus had the air of two people whose personalities were compatible enough that they would have gotten along if they did not play on opposite teams. "I... may have wanted to get some details from the other side. See what they thought about maybe calming things down."

Achilles eschewed a chair to sit directly on the table instead, folding up one leg and dangling the injured one over the side. Zagreus thought perhaps that should not be allowed, but he wasn't wearing shoes and therefore wasn't scuffing up the table, so Zagreus had no reason to tell him to get down. "And what did Hector say?"

"He said the only way to stop things would be for Menelaus to apologize for overreacting about his girlfriend breaking up with him for Paris." He only got about halfway through the sentence when the two of them started laughing.

"That's never going to happen," Patroclus said, the first to recover.

"And why not? It seems... reasonable."

"It seems reasonable only to a person who hasn't had his heart broken," Patroclus said. This only made Achilles laugh louder. "Fine. I meant his pride. That's really what it's about, right?"

Achilles took a deep breath before managing to say actual words. "Of course it is! I mean, sure, he's upset that Helen left him, but at this point it's more like, well, we issued the challenge so now we can't lose."

Zagreus frowned, folding up his feet so that he could sit cross-legged on the chair. "That sounds a little..."

"Stupid?" Patroclus suggested. "Yes."

"It's just a fact of life," Achilles sighed, sliding off the table and making for the coffee machine (one of those single-cup ones, like a Keurig, but off-brand), not bothering with his crutches and therefore walking quite slowly and with a limp. "These are the things you learn when you get to be an adult, Zagreus. One: nobody understands how insurance works. Two: straight men are idiots."

Zagreus turned in his chair so that he could watch Achilles, who was pulling his hair up as his coffee brewed. The ridiculously enormous hickey was still there, of course. "Does that make not-straight men not idiots? Because that doesn't seem right. I'm terrible at school."

"I think all men are idiots, some of us are just self-aware idiots," Patroclus said.

Achilles removed the mug as soon as the coffee was done, and rather than drinking it, handed it across the table to Pat. "More importantly, good on you," he said to Zagreus. "Don't think I let that slip by me."

"I—well. I just meant—"

"Is this about whoever you sent that letter to this week? That was a boy, right?" Patroclus was, irritatingly, correct.

Dammit. Zagreus knew he shouldn't have gone into the mailroom at the same time as Odysseus, people were always bothering him about all the many letters he sent to Penelope. "That's just a friend," he said quickly. Too quickly. Dammit, again. "He's my best friend."

"Then he's a good person to date, in my opinion," Achilles said, making another cup of coffee, this time for himself. "I've been best friends with Pat since we were eight."

"Seven."

"What?"

"You were seven," Patroclus corrected him, "I'm older than you."

"Oh, whatever." Achilles sat next to Zagreus, just so that he could lean his forearm on the back of Zagreus' chair to be extra intimidating. "The point is: you're a senior in high school, right?"

"Uh, I will be in the fall."

"Right. Well. You ought to tell him before you graduate, before he goes off to college and meets somebody new and exciting and dates them instead. Because then, you will be quite upset. I speak from experience." He let go of the back of Zag's chair and took a drink of his coffee.

"You mean, you speak from *my* experience. You were the one who went off and got a girlfriend. And also broke up with her as soon as I transferred in, I might add."

"Well, yes, the love of my life returned. Quite important."

Zagreus thought Pat might have kicked Achilles under the table.

"Are we going to tell him the whole story about the drag show, or...?"

"Patroclus! You're distracting me."

Zag thought he might want to hear the whole story about the drag show.

"My point is," said Achilles, which sounded like it wasn't the story about the drag show, "Menelaus is never going to apologize, because it would be admitting defeat. If he apologizes, the Trojans win. And they don't just win against him, they win against all of us."

All of us. So, Achilles had a bit of a personal stake in this, too.

"Is there any way this will end without bloodshed?" Zagreus asked, purposefully dramatic.

Patroclus shrugged. "Agamemnon is the driving force behind all this nonsense, even if Menelaus is the one Helen broke up with. He's a senior this year, so as long as he graduates with his degree in assholery and heads off to get a real job, we won't have to deal with him next summer."

"And for now?" Zagreus asked, even though coming back next summer when Agamemnon wasn't there sounded sort of nice. He'd be eighteen, too, so he could work there in an official capacity and get paid for everything.

Achilles lifted his mug as if he was toasting Zagreus. "For now, you win us capture the flag tomorrow night."

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Capture the flag gets way too intense.

Notes for the Chapter:

This might be one of my favorite action scenes I've written in a while and it's CAPTURE THE FLAG. Well, what can you do!

Agamemnon may have been insane, but he did plan for all competitions with a scarily meticulous amount of detail. Wednesday's after-dinner session, which was normally the space where the camp would come together to play a game but was instead free time because the game wouldn't begin until sunset, found Zagreus sitting at one of the picnic tables outside the cabin circle in front of a map.

It wasn't even one of the standard maps of camp that they used to show people how not to get lost. It was hand-drawn, and contained such details as locations of particularly climbable trees, the boundaries of the playing field, and which areas of the ravine near the Trojan camp were shallow enough that you could jump into them without hurting yourself. Achilles clearly had not followed those instructions, because that was how he'd sprained his ankle.

"Zagreus!" Agamemnon's roar of a voice brought him back to the present—while Agamemnon had been drawing out strategies for their defensive side, Zag had been daydreaming about how he'd escape if he was ever locked in the equipment shed—and he returned his attention to the map. "We're planning a new strategy for you."

Zagreus didn't know any of the old strategies, so he was not sure how exciting this should be, but he tried to look interested.

"Don't keep us in suspense," drawled Odysseus, who had probably come up with half this plan. He was currently seated on one of the rocks around the

fire pit, his hand around their team's flag, which was neon blue and edged in reflective tape in order to keep playing in the dark from being a completely impossible task.

"We're plotting an invasion by sea," said Agamemnon.

Of course, this must have meant an invasion by lake.

Agamemnon's description of the plan lasted until the sun was half-sunken below the horizon, and Zagreus did tune out some parts, but he understood it as this:

The main border between the Greek and Trojan camps was the lake. Large, man-made, and vaguely oval-shaped, the lake was always muddy and the water smelled awful. But it did contain an enormous floating trampoline which was greatly enjoyed by all. There was a thin path around the lake, and halfway along it was a wooden archway determining the separation point between the two halves of camp.

The path went through a heavily wooded area, and led to a bridge over the ravine, directly in front of the Trojan camp. The area right around the border-arch was considered no-man's land, as it would be nigh-impossible for anybody to get past with guards stationed at the archway itself. It was also one of the only places aside from the cabin circles which was lit, a single hanging LED lantern positioned right at the center.

Ordinarily, Zagreus would have to pass through this point to get to the other side. The Trojans had many tactics, most of which involved the ravine. Paris, according to rumor, had bought a full camouflage suit meant to be used for hunting and hid in the ravine, waiting for unsuspecting players to wander into his range or to sprain an ankle.

The Greeks had no such ravine, their advantage being that the woods stopped abruptly a few dozen yards from their cabin circle and the wide path that traveled straight through camp made it easy to see anybody coming.

The new advantage was that the Greeks had the lakeside equipment shed where Zagreus had found Achilles and Patroclus yesterday.

Meaning: the Greeks had sole access to all the canoes.

Agamemnon planned to have Achilles row Zagreus across the lake (which Zagreus suspected was mostly to give Achilles something to do since he wasn't running and would distract Patroclus if left to his own devices). They would run aground on the back side of the Trojan camp, which was, unfortunately, where the riverbank was steepest. Zagreus would have to clamber up said riverbank, locate the Trojan flag, steal it, and get back to Achilles in the boat.

Simple, really.

The entire time they spent in the boat, Zagreus was terrified someone would see them, so he ended up lying down, because at least if Achilles was recognized, the Trojans wouldn't assume he was doing anything strategic. Not like he could run anywhere. He technically wasn't even playing.

"There are rules about where they can hide their flag," Achilles said, barely audible over the sound of water rushing past the canoe paddle. "It can't be somewhere you have to climb more than three feet to get it—one of those Trojan bastards hid one on a rooftop a few years back and somebody broke an arm. And it can't be inside a cabin. It has to be somewhere within the cabin circle. Try to sneak around and locate it before you start running, so they don't catch you, yes?"

"I'm not very stealthy," Zagreus said. "I'm fast, not sneaky."

"Well, then, wait for Agamemnon to come charging through with his entire cabin as a distraction."

Zagreus looked at the sky above, the stars so much more visible here than they were back home. The moon was full, which wouldn't be much of an advantage for him, considering the amount of woods that covered the Trojan camp. If he sat up, he probably could have seen the light of the campsite, several lanterns set up on the four points of the fire pit, as lighting

a fire during a game that involved running recklessly around the fire pit was against the rules.

That rule, they'd managed to come up with before somebody got injured.

Distantly, he could hear the sound of yelling as the Greeks and Trojans warred. Up close, he could hear the hammering of his heart in his ears. *It's just a game*, Zagreus told himself. *It's just a game and if you lose, there's another round next week.*

But Zagreus had always been eager to prove himself, dammit.

Achilles stopped them a few feet from the shore, not running aground because it would take too much time to push off again. Zagreus made to get out of the canoe, but Achilles held up a hand. "Wait. Odysseus is going to signal us when the Trojans invade our camp. That way, you'll have the least amount of them to contend with at their site. They don't play much defense, the Trojans."

The Greeks wouldn't have played much defense, either, if they didn't have Odysseus and Patroclus. Odysseus played defensively because he was strategic. Pat did it because he didn't like to run. Most of the campers that helped them with it also didn't like to run.

"You look like you're going to jump out of your skin," Achilles observed.

"This is more tense than I expected," Zagreus admitted.

"You can call me if there's trouble." Achilles did not mention the fact that doing so was a last-ditch effort. Zagreus had one of the radios (they looked like walkie-talkies, but everyone called them radios) that several counselors kept on their person in case of emergency, and Achilles had another. But this was yet another rule of the game: all of the radios were required to be tuned to the same frequency. If he called for Achilles, Hector would hear him too.

"Right," Zagreus said, not mentioning the perilousness of it either.

"Here." Achilles leaned to the side, which rocked the canoe, and reached into the water. He extended his hand toward Zagreus' face before Zag could protest or question, and smudged a dark line of the silt from the lake floor on each of his cheeks. "War paint."

"Lake mud," Zagreus corrected him. It cooled as it dried. Achilles washed his hand off in the lake. Zagreus heard the distant rubber-band-snap call of one of the lake frogs. "It smells terrible."

"It's something the Trojans do. It's a disguise," Achilles explained.

"Is it?"

"They also don't wear shirts, if you really want to blend in."

"I'm fine as is, thank you." Zagreus wondered what they did on particularly cold nights. Even in the height of summer, a day of rainfall would chill the whole—

"There it is. Go!" The signal was the lantern closest to the lake turning from its normal eye-searing white to a slightly-less-eye-searing red.

Zagreus tried not to splash too loudly as he sloshed himself to shore, glad he'd worn hiking sandals instead of his sneakers, which would not take too well to being soaked through. The water was barely above knee-height but Zagreus unclipped the radio from his waistband and held it up higher just to prevent it from being accidentally soaked if he tripped.

Scrambling up the shoreline wasn't too difficult, the tree roots having grown into a tangle on the exterior of the soil. It made for an easy grip, as long as Zagreus forced himself to ignore his mind's natural inclination to wonder how many spiders were hidden in there. Once safely up the bank, he pressed his back to the tree that was growing its roots out the side of the shore-ledge, breathing deep as he peered around the trunk.

The campsite, like the Greeks', was lit only by lanterns and the lights that hung over each cabin's door, which were all turned on during the night. The new addition to the campsite, which was situated so as not to be visible by

somebody coming over the bridge but was immediately obvious from the angle Zagreus was entering the camp, was a truck.

It was one of the maintenance vehicles, parked with its back end facing the camp, the red Trojan flag dangling over the tailgate like a fishing rod over the side of a boat. The fisherman in question was Hector, sitting in the truck bed with several of his campers, apparently playing defense for once. Dammit.

Zagreus looked back at Achilles, horror coursing through him because there was no way he was going to get past Hector plus five teenagers.

Achilles, who could not see this ambush waiting, gave him a thumbs-up.

Zagreus tipped his head back against the tree, waiting. There was nothing he could do until Agamemnon charged.

Achilles made a complicated hand gesture that Zagreus interpreted as *do you have eyes on the flag?*

Thumbs-up. *Yes.*

Shrug, hands raised. *So what's the problem?*

Zagreus dragged a line across his throat. *They'll kill me.*

Achilles held up a hand. *Wait.* He pointed somewhere to Zagreus' distant left.

It took Zagreus a moment to interpret what Achilles was indicating, but as soon as he heard the war cry, roared like a wounded animal, he figured it out. Agamemnon had charged.

The bridge creaked as it swayed with the weight of Agamemnon's entire army thundering across it. Zagreus peered around the tree trunk again. Hector and all of his campers leapt off the truck, chasing after the invaders. If there was ever a moment, it was now. He saluted Achilles and darted around the tree, sprinting straight across the campsite and through the fire pit to leap into the back of the truck and snatch up the flag.

"Hey!" shouted one of the kids, who had circled behind him. Zagreus wasn't going to be able to go back the way he came. Well. There was that escape plan ruined.

He scrambled over the cab of the truck instead, leaving a muddy footprint on the windshield as he launched himself off the front of it, racing around the back side of their cabins to meet up with the path that snaked along the edge of the lake, leading away from the Trojan cabin circle. It'd be a longer run, but he'd avoid Paris in the ravine, and the bottleneck of the bridge.

He unclipped the radio from his waistband and jammed his thumb against the talk button. "Achilles! Far side, now!"

He hoped he'd given Achilles enough of a head-start. Even though Zagreus had to follow the path around the edge of the lake and Achilles could travel as the crow flies, Zag was pretty sure he'd outrun the canoe.

The path around the far side of the lake, which led to the outdoor amphitheater where they held the opening and closing ceremonies of the camp week, was a wide-open dirt road. This was where Zagreus shone; he was fast enough that he practically *flew* as he ran, stopping for nothing, although his heart dropped out of his chest and was left behind in the dust when he heard the most foreboding possible sound come from the Trojan cabin circle.

The truck's engine came on.

Nobody was faster than Zagreus, except for, you know, *a car*.

The run around the far side of the lake was too long for Zagreus to sprint full-tilt. He'd just have to hope he could meet Achilles in the middle.

When the treeline thinned and Zagreus could see the lake again, he caught sight of Achilles rowing in the direction of the ampitheatre, blessedly close enough to shore. Too far for Zagreus to wade in like he'd waded out, though, and the radio was not waterproof.

His mother was going to kill him if this didn't work.

He'd seen somebody throw Achilles' water bottle to him from the bottom of the climbing tower, Achilles having plucked it out of the air as if it was being handed to him. He also knew Achilles had both his hands on the canoe paddle.

"Achilles!" he shouted again, "*catch!*"

He could hear the truck slowing behind him, likely to let Hector out at a run, and he didn't even look to see whether Achilles had caught the radio before scrambling down the bank and into the water, flag still in hand.

The canoe rocked dangerously as Zagreus hauled himself in, and it would have tipped over, ruining Zagreus' plan to not destroy the radio, if Achilles hadn't thrown his weight to the opposite side to counterbalance him.

"Let's go, let's go!" he shouted, plonking himself down in the bottom of the canoe rather than taking one of the seats, stowing the soggy Trojan flag in the belly of the canoe with him.

Achilles dropped the radio onto Zagreus' lap. "You'd better be glad I'm good at this!" He shoved off a rock he'd narrowly avoided hitting, giving them some momentum to go sailing back across the water.

"None of them are particularly strong swimmers, right?" Zagreus asked, while Achilles shouted into his radio that they had the flag and were headed back to camp.

"Of course they are! Paris is a lifeguard!"

That was probably why Zagreus saw someone come up out of the ravine, throw off a ridiculous-looking jacket, and swan-dive into the water. "He's going to catch up with us," he warned Achilles, Paris still approaching at top speed. "Should I jump in and swim to shore?" A win didn't count unless the flag was planted in the center of the fire pit. Just crossing the border with it wasn't enough.

"You're not faster than him," Achilles said. He was looking over his shoulder at the Greek camp, squinting at the figures onshore, all of them

hollering at the canoe. "I can't tell... god I hope that's Pat."

That was all the warning Zagreus got before Achilles snatched the flag out of the bottom of the canoe, stood up, and threw it like a javelin. Paris caught up with the boat as soon as the flag left Achilles' hand, rocking it so hard Achilles fell backward into Zagreus, cursing Paris and slapping at his face.

Over Achilles' shoulder, Zagreus saw the flag hurtling toward Achilles' intended target, who caught it with ease, turned, and ran.

"I think it was Pat," Zag said, "whoever it was, he caught it!"

"Great! Good! Paris, don't *fucking strangle me*—"

"*You sneaky little bitch!*" Paris spat, and the boat lurched ominously.

"Quit pulling my hair, what are you, five!?" Achilles reached up to try to bat him away and elbowed Zag in the chin.

"Ow. Hey, don't tip the boat over, the radios are in here!" Zagreus protested.

"Let *go*, Paris, you little shit."

"Or get in," Zagreus suggested, "so you don't have to swim all the way back to your side."

"Oh, I'll swim," Paris said venomously. "I'll swim, and you assholes had better prepare yourselves for next week." He released the boat, shoving it for good measure, and Achilles disentangled himself from Zagreus and from the canoe seats, leaning over the side to fish the paddle out of the lake from where it had slid while Paris heckled them.

"I take it invasion by sea is going to be everyone's fun new strategy now?" Zagreus asked.

Achilles sighed and started rowing them back to shore. "Probably. Ugh. I hope to god my ankle heals up by next week."

Zagreus discovered that his legs shook as he got out of the canoe when they reached the shore, some of the other Greeks coming over to help pull the boat out of the water and flip it over so it could dry out. Achilles was standing on one foot, having left his crutches somewhere, and he'd been leaning on Zagreus (which probably did not help Zagreus feel steadier) until Patroclus joined them and hugged Achilles hard enough to pick him up.

"I knew you'd win it for us, kid." Agamemnon slapped Zagreus on the back so hard he almost fell over.

"It didn't all go quite as planned—they had a truck, and—" Zagreus stammered, wiping the 'war paint' off his cheeks with the back of his hand.

"What does it matter? We won!"

What mattered was the sinking feeling that Zagreus was no longer going to be a good candidate for diplomatic endeavors. It was accompanied by the certainty that he'd made an enemy of every one of the Trojans, but especially Paris, who was as entrenched at the center of this conflict just as Menelaus was.

In the distance, Patroclus had Achilles over his shoulder and was spinning him around in circles while Achilles cackled and howled with victory.

"Come on then," said Odysseus, "to the victors go the spoils."

"What spoils?" Zagreus asked. The kids were already running ahead of them up the hill in the direction of the lodge.

"Carry me all the way up there," Achilles told Patroclus.

"I will not."

"What did we win?" Zagreus repeated.

This time, Odysseus answered. "The winners get to raid the ice cream freezer at midnight."

— — —

"How are you enjoying being a hero?" Patroclus asked Zagreus, after the third time he'd been congratulated on his win as they left the lodge after breakfast. Zag was accompanying Patroclus to archery, a place where he at least felt helpful, because Patroclus couldn't both gather up all the arrows that had been loosed after each round and entertain the kids who were waiting for their turn. And Pat was awful at picking up all the arrows anyhow, because the fletching was bright red, which would normally be easy to spot when someone managed to fire into the woods instead of at the target, except that Patroclus was colorblind.

"Honestly, it's making me a bit uncomfortable. People used to mostly ignore me, but now all the campers keep asking me to tell them what happened." His part of the story was not all that interesting. Honestly, the really exciting bit had been Achilles throwing the flag from the lake, which everybody had been around to see and therefore did not need recounted. "Also, the Trojan campers have taken to booing me whenever they see me, which is quite demoralizing."

"It's all right, they do it to Achilles, too," Patroclus said. "Probably would do the same to me, but they don't really know who caught the flag, only that Achilles threw it."

Zagreus shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket as they walked. The sky was gray and it'd been drizzling that morning, but it had slowed now. Zagreus still had his raincoat on, just in case, and Patroclus was in the hoodie that Achilles had been wearing last night.

"Do you think I should mention to my mother that they used the maintenance truck to try and catch me?" Zagreus asked.

Patroclus shook his head. "No. Because then we can't use that next week."

"Ugh. This war is ridiculous."

"It most certainly is." They passed that very truck, waiting at the trailhead with the crew that was headed out to the high-ropes course sitting in the truck bed. Patroclus whistled at Achilles, who whistled back. "The war's not all of camp, though. Do you want to come to the truce cookout on Friday?"

"What's that?"

"Not everybody's as crazy as Agamemnon and Hector and their younger brothers." As they entered the woods, Patroclus grumbled about the mud underfoot. "Every Friday, after the campers leave, we go to the lake and have a cookout, just the staff. It's fun, you should come."

"Yeah, I'll come. It's at the lake?"

"The big lake."

The Big Lake was the reason Zagreus didn't see Paris around camp often—the lake at the camp was big enough for canoeing, but the camp also owned a speedboat which was kept at a marina off a nearby lake that was actually large enough for such activities so they could take the campers water-skiing. Paris was the only lifeguard who was also licensed to drive a boat, and spent most of his time out there. The Big Lake, which also had a name but was never referred to by it, was also rumored to be one of the most popular nearby attractions to take a date to.

Granted, the only other nearby attractions were the woods, a Dairy Queen, and a diner that was mostly frequented by a nearby retirement community.

"It'd be nice to hang out with everybody while we're not in the middle of a fight," said Zagreus, who was honestly surprised they'd have something like that set up.

Patroclus sighed. "Well, Agamemnon and Menelaus never go. I never see Paris either. Sometimes Hector. I think Andy makes him."

"Andy?"

"His girlfriend. Andromache."

"Oh, right. I think I met her, once."

"Plus, it's probably the only time you'll ever see Helen outside the office or the Trojan camp. She feels quite awkward talking to the Greeks, considering she's the reason for the whole thing."

If that was true, perhaps Helen was exactly the person Zagreus should have been speaking to about all this. She might be the key to getting the Greeks to calm down, if she just had a conversation with Menelaus. This was sort of a breakthrough!

Zagreus then tripped over a tree root and mostly forgot about his breakthrough.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Zag gets dragged into even more camp traditions, has a conversation with Helen, and gets a letter from Than. Is it a love letter? Achilles says so.

Thursday night found Zagreus sitting at a late-night campfire with Achilles, Patroclus, Odysseus, and a couple of the girls' cabin counselors that he didn't know very well. One of them was Bri, who was Pat's friend, but he couldn't recall the other's name and felt awkward asking, considering he'd been there almost a week already.

It was pretty relaxing, honestly, considering last night's events. Zagreus sat on the picnic table beside Pat, who had Achilles sitting between his legs on the bench. Pat was braiding Achilles' hair, and doing a fairly neat job at it, considering the lack of light.

"Nice necklace," Bri said to Patroclus, who grinned at her for a second before returning to his task.

"Thank you, isn't it lovely?"

The necklace in question was exceedingly ugly. Achilles had made it for him as a joke, which Achilles would remind anyone who asked. It made Pat look a bit like a surfer-hippie combo, especially when his hair wasn't pulled up. He had been wearing it all day just to spite Achilles, who did not want to look upon his creation.

"Extremely tasteful," Bri said, poking at the fire with a stick.

"Fuck off," Achilles said to either of them, or both.

The door to one of the cabins creaked open, and Agamemnon, Menelaus, and their entire group of campers, some of whom looked quite sleepy, all emerged. Zagreus wasn't quite sure what they were doing up; Odysseus was

only out here because his co-counselor was in with their kids, who were all asleep. It was definitely past bedtime.

"Going to paint the rock?" Achilles asked, as if such an excursion was quite ordinary.

"Yep." Menelaus looked at Zagreus. "Do you wanna come?"

"Me? Why?"

"Because you've never done it before," he said. Zagreus wasn't even sure what they were doing, really, so yes, he'd never done it before.

"Give me a minute for Pat to finish this, and I'll come, too," said Achilles, who was now in possession of a mostly-finished, impressively neat French braid.

"Fine. But if you slow us down, I'm leaving you behind," Agamemnon grumbled.

Patroclus finished tying off Achilles' braid just in time for Achilles to toss his head at Agamemnon's suggestion. "Oh, please," Achilles said, "I'm faster on crutches than you ever were on two feet. Come on, Zag."

"Where are we—I mean, what are we doing?" Zagreus still trotted after Achilles anyway, fairly certain that if Achilles was joining him, it probably wouldn't be too dangerous or too stupid.

"That rock, in front of the lodge," Achilles said. Zagreus knew what he was talking about, it had been painted to look like a turtle shell all week.

"What of it?" Despite Achilles' protests, they were still far enough behind that Zagreus didn't feel as if he couldn't ask questions for fear of incurring Agamemnon's ire.

"During the week, different cabins paint it—although nobody's gone over it so far this week, I think because your mother did the turtle, so there's no factor of retaliation there. But tomorrow's Friday, so whoever paints it then

will have it all weekend." Not that anybody was around during the weekend to see it. "You can only paint it at night, hence... all this."

Zagreus noted that Agamemnon's campers were outfitted for war, which really just meant that a lot of them were holding squirt guns. Menelaus had a plastic bag that was full of spray paint, which he dropped to the ground once they reached their destination, and Agamemnon clicked on that ridiculous flashlight he had, a foot-long Mag-lite that looked as if he could use it to crack somebody's skull. It was nice and bright, though.

The campers each got a turn, covering up the turtle shell with a base of different shades of blue, black, and gray. Achilles stayed back a ways, looking off into the distance in the direction of the Trojan camp instead of at the rock. Had he actually come here to paint, or was he spying, somehow? Or did he simply join to keep an eye on Zagreus?

More likely, he'd joined to keep an eye on Agamemnon, and ensure that he didn't bully Zagreus too much. Zagreus would say he didn't need the assistance, but...

Once the base color was completed, Menelaus produced a stencil with their cabin's crest on it, which Zagreus had not been able to interpret for the longest time until Patroclus had explained that it was a ram's horn. It looked more like a strange spiral shape of no consequence, even when Zagreus looked at it with the knowledge of what it really was.

"You want to do this part?" Menelaus asked him, and Zagreus had a strange urge to look over his shoulder at Achilles before he agreed.

"Sure," he said, ignoring that and looking at Menelaus instead.

"You're a bit early, if you don't want the Trojans covering this up by morning," he heard Achilles say to Agamemnon, as Menelaus handed him the gold paint to stencil in their crest with.

"It'll be fine. I'm staying right here, make sure none of them get to it."

Zagreus discovered that it was quite difficult to paint on the curved surface of a rock, but the crest came out looking relatively fine, enough that Menelaus proclaimed it complete and all the campers cheered.

They left Agamemnon camped out by the rock, Zagreus giving him a look over his shoulder as he watched him sweep the area with his flashlight.

"He looks like he's going to get into a fistfight with anybody who tries to cover up his spray paint," Zagreus said. He probably would have minded it less if this was about a desire to preserve one's artistic creation, but the rock looked rather unimpressive and was entirely not worth the fuss.

Achilles sighed. "He looks that way for a reason, Zag."

— — —

Friday mornings meant breakfast in bed, which was more like 'kitchen staff's morning off,' and Zagreus had volunteered to deliver said breakfasts to each cabin. Even though he was technically not allowed to drive camp vehicles both because he was not an official member of staff and because he only had his learner's permit, this was approved. Zagreus thought perhaps this was because nobody wanted to get up early in the morning and go around delivering enormous coolers to every cabin.

He was a bit of a morning person, though, and besides, he'd wanted to see if the rock was still painted with their colors.

It was.

Also, there was no visible sign of bloodshed, so Agamemnon probably didn't get into a fight.

The design looked even worse in the sunlight. Zagreus hoped his mother would paint it again next time.

Over the week, he'd developed a habit of poking his head into the mailroom and picking up anything for his mother, in case she wasn't near the lodge. Today, her mailbox, which was only labeled "P" with a series of tiny

flowers drawn on either side of the initial, was mostly empty, save for a single plain envelope, which Zagreus plucked out and looked at, mostly because he was nosy.

It was not addressed to Persephone.

The addressee was simply listed as "Zag," and he immediately recognized the return address.

It was from Than.

However thrilled he was to get a letter from his best friend, there was no time to read it now, and so Zagreus stuffed it in his pocket before continuing with his business, the weight of it feeling much heavier than a simple sheet of paper in an envelope should.

The Trojan cabins were closer, so he dropped theirs off first, thankfully without incident. Their campers were too busy packing up to leave in order to start booing Zagreus on sight. Hector even helped Zagreus unload them, which felt either like a show of goodwill or like an effort to get him to leave faster.

At the Greek camp, it was a different story. Patroclus, who was the only one not currently doing anything, actively refused to help Zagreus unload the coolers, instead deciding to sit idly and eat a yogurt he'd stolen out of Agamemnon's cabin's coolers while watching Zagreus work.

"You were the one who volunteered for this job," he said.

"You're being an ass," Zagreus told him. Patroclus did not deny this fact.

After making his rounds, Zagreus had to drop the truck off at its designated parking spot at the front of camp. With that done, he should probably have run off to return the keys to his mother, but...

He remained in the front seat of the truck as he pulled the letter out of his pocket, smoothing out a bent corner on it before sliding the key to the truck under the sealed edge to tear it open.

Zag,

I am absolutely not coming out there to join you. Volunteering at a summer camp for several weeks sounds like my personal hell, and as much as I like you, it's not enough to get me to do that.

But I am enjoying THE DRAMA so I will accept more letters.

Also, maybe see if your mom will let you use the camp phone to call me. Like at night, when nobody needs to use it. Because it's weirdly quiet around here without you, and I don't like it.

It's been a pretty boring summer so far. Hypnos got fired from another summer job for falling asleep again. I guess he probably wasn't cut out to be a lifeguard.

I did go by your house and see Cerberus for a little bit, but I just sort of petted him through the fence because I didn't want to ask your dad to come in just to pet the dog. I ran into Dusa though, and she said apparently Cerb destroyed the living room couch in protest when you left. I'm not saying you owe your dad a new couch, but I am saying your dad thinks you do.

I was thinking, next weekend if you want, I could drive up and pick you up at camp on Friday so we can hang out over the weekend. You could stay at my house so you don't have to see your dad. Charon will let me use his car if I wash it for him.

Send me a letter and let me know. Or call, maybe. I know I say you talk too much but I kind of miss hearing you.

Love,

Than

Love.

LOVE.

Wait, *love*, love, or love as in 'you signed your letter this way so I'm doing it too'?

Zagreus flipped the letter over as if the answer would be written on the backside, but it was, of course, completely blank. Thanatos wasn't much of one for secret messages on the backs of letters. He turned over the possibilities in his head a few more times. *Love*. What did it *mean*?

Someone knocked on the window of the truck, startling Zagreus so hard he threw the letter in the air and then had to collect it.

His mother was laughing at him a little bit by the time he actually managed to open the car door.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I think that's the longest I've ever seen you sit still."

"Oh. Fine, totally—" he did fall trying to get down from the truck, but that must have just been because he was used to entering and exiting shorter cars. "Definitely fine. I got a letter from Than, so, uh, I was just reading that."

"I see," his mother said, in the sort of way that made Zagreus suspect she was planning to tell Nyx about this.

"Um. Anyway. Here's the keys." After handing them over, he folded the letter back up and returned it to his pocket. "Than wanted to know if he could pick me up next weekend so we could, uh. I dunno. Hang out?" He was going to need to ask *somebody* for advice. Maybe Patroclus. Definitely not Achilles.

"That sounds nice." She may have been purposefully trying to keep her tone neutral. "Well. If you're not busy currently, do you mind hopping back in that truck with me and helping get everyone's luggage up to the front of camp?"

Zagreus shook his head as he circled around to the passenger seat. "I knew you were just bringing me out here to use me for my ability to carry heavy

things!"

"Come now, Zagreus, you wouldn't accuse your mother of such a thing!" she said, but did not deny said accusation for a second.

— — —

A single week of camp, Zagreus had discovered, was exhausting.

Especially when you ended said week hauling the entire camp's worth of luggage up to the dining hall. That got tiring real fast—a good sixty percent of these children's parents *really* over-packed. Either that, or the campers had picked up an entire rock collection over the week.

He was ready to head to the basement bedroom in Persephone's house on the outskirts of the camp and go to sleep at a ridiculously early hour when he remembered about the cook-out.

Dammit.

He'd told Pat he would go.

And he really wanted to get Helen's opinion on the Drama.

He changed into a less-sweaty T-shirt, looked forlornly at his bed, and trotted back up to the lodge to board into one of the camp vans and head for the Big Lake.

A collection of people had already congregated around the vans, looking more presentable than Zagreus had seen them all week, except perhaps for the very beginning when they met all of the campers' parents and had to look like people one would want to entrust their children to. Half the girls were in *dresses*. Achilles might have washed his hair. All of Paris' lifeguard buddies (Paris himself was notably absent) were actually wearing shirts for once.

"I didn't realize I was underdressed," Zagreus said, because he was wearing shorts with at least one hole in them and a T-shirt advertising his high

school's production of the Wizard of Oz (which Zagreus had not even been in).

Patroclus only shrugged. "You're fine. I think most people use this as an attempt to look attractive despite it being, you know, camp. You don't need to do that, you've got your little high-school boyfriend."

"Oh, well, about that—"

"Zag!" that was Achilles. "Sit in the trunk with me!"

"Why?"

"Because Pat won't!"

Pat probably had good reason not to. The trunk of the camp vans smelled like lake water. Granted, the rest of the vans only smelled slightly less like lake water. The pine-tree air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirrors were god-knows-how-old and did not actually do any freshening of any air.

Zagreus got in the trunk anyway, because he'd rather that than ending up squashed between people on one of the bench seats. The vans were far past capacity, but it was only a ten-minute drive, so being squashed wasn't too bad, but Zagreus discovered that he much preferred sitting in the trunk, where he could turn sideways and stretch his feet out. Achilles, being much taller than him, was still folded up.

Patroclus had somehow gotten himself into the very back seat, which was impressive for somebody so broad, and was leaning over the back of his seat to talk to the two of them. Hector, who was also in the very back, along with someone Zag didn't recognize (his girlfriend?) seemed increasingly irritated because the road to the Big Lake was winding and any sharp turns knocked Patroclus right into him.

"What is it you were going to tell me about your boyfriend?" Patroclus asked him, a question Zagreus really would have liked to have spared until they were not in a crowded van with somebody who seemed to deeply dislike Zag sitting next to them.

"He's not my boyfriend." Zag patted the shape of the letter still in his pocket, folded a bit smaller this time. "But we're hanging out next weekend." He did not mention the 'love'.

"Do we get to meet him?" Achilles asked, nudging Zagreus with his uninjured foot. The sprained side no longer required crutches, but it was still braced and he walked slower than he wanted to.

"Oh, god. I hope not."

"Hey!" Patroclus reached over the back of the seat to tousle Zag's hair, and Zagreus shoved him away, which jostled him into Hector again. "Why wouldn't you want him to meet your cool college friends?"

"I don't recall having any cool college friends." This only made Pat swat at his head again. "And, anyways, he's just picking me up from camp and then we're going to his house."

The van pulled into a parking spot near the little picnic pavilion at the lake's shore, and Achilles reached out to pop the trunk open from the inside. "Here's what you do," he said, as the two of them made their way out of the trunk. Patroclus, instead of climbing out of one of the normal passenger-side doors of the van, scrambled over the back of the seat and out of the trunk as well. "When you see him, you just kiss him."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"I can't just—Achilles, you can't kiss somebody out of the blue." As much as Zagreus had been imagining it.

"You can, see, watch," he said, and demonstrated.

"That doesn't count, he's already your boyfriend!"

Patroclus, who seemed equal parts baffled and pleased, asked, "what are you trying to get him to do, again?" Achilles repeated his advice, and

Patroclus groaned. "No. Don't do that. Zagreus, don't listen to him. Just be normal."

"What are you two, the angel and devil on his shoulders?" Hector asked, as he pushed past them. "Just talk to this guy you like, alright?" He mumbled the advice over his shoulder, as if, were Zagreus to press him on it, he'd say it was the wind.

Huh.

Maybe Hector didn't hate him as much as Zagreus assumed.

"Nope. Kiss him," Achilles repeated, which made Pat put him over his shoulder and threaten to dump him in the lake.

At least they didn't try to give him any further advice.

Zagreus recognized Helen as one of the girls dressed up very nice, although she always looked nice. Even when she was just working in the office wearing a camp T-shirt, her hair was always elaborately pulled up, and Zagreus didn't think he'd ever seen her without makeup and some kind of jewelry on.

Now that Zagreus knew the two sides of camp were basically at war over her, she felt far more intimidating to talk to.

Luckily, she was willing to start up the conversation.

"Hector tells me you've been asking around about trying to stop the conflict going on," she said, as Zagreus helped her unload the contents of the enormous cooler that had been in the trunk of the other van.

"I'd like to try to keep the peace, yes." He unwrapped the tin foil forming a makeshift lid over a bowl full of watermelon chunks.

"Next year should be different. Agamemnon won't be here, and... neither will I. Don't spread that around. But I'm studying abroad, so hopefully that means everything will calm down." She sighed, picking up a bag full of

paper plates and plastic cutlery, setting those out within easy reach of the food. "Don't ever date somebody you meet at summer camp."

"Aren't you still doing that?" he asked.

"Yes." She frowned. "God only knows what kind of disaster would befall us if I broke Paris' heart, too, but I think I might despite any intentions otherwise."

"Ugh." Zagreus took a seat at the picnic table, his thumbnail digging into some of the green paint that was chipping off. "So, you're telling me I can't just... meddle in everybody's relationships until they're fixed?"

"It would be nice, wouldn't it!" She reached across the table to ruffle his hair. "You're a nice boy. Maybe you can. You have all summer, after all." When she smiled at him, there was something in her expression that reminded him a little bit of Nyx, somehow. Like she actually believed he could help.

"For now, I think I might just find a way to avoid getting roped into capture the flag next week."

Helen sighed. "Oh, that game. I agree, don't play it, you'll break something."

"Did you hear about the thing with the canoe?"

"Right, I'll correct myself: you'll break something, or drown."

"I know, right, if only they'd play it before the sun—AGH!"

Achilles, who had been dumped in the lake, had decided to sneak up behind Zagreus to hug him, effectively soaking him with the lake water that was pouring off his hair and soaked through his shirt. "Hey! Colluding with the other side, are you?"

"I thought this thing was a truce!"

"Peace is never an option! Pat, throw him in the lake too!"

Zagreus just *barely* managed to convince Pat to give him a second to take the letter from Than out of his pocket before he was tossed over the side of the dock and into the water.

— — —

Hi Than,

I survived my first week! Are you impressed? Probably not, summer camp death rates are quite low, although who knows, given Agamemnon's general... everything.

I would love to come hang out with you next weekend, although I will warn you: Achilles and Patroclus (those are the two guys I'm friends with now, they live in the same cabin as me) definitely want to meet you and are planning all sorts of embarrassing things to say about me. Don't listen to them!!

I'm really excited to see you, thank you for going out of your way to get Charon's car for the weekend, I know he's crazy about that thing and won't even let Hypnos look at it after the Milkshake Incident.

Things look like they're not going to get much more peaceful here, despite my best efforts, but I'm determined to keep trying!

Also, I had an idea:

So, there's this lake everybody goes to a little ways from camp, and it's really pretty and reportedly a good spot for a date—

I just realized that all looks like one word??

I should have written this in pencil.

Anyway if you WANT to, we could go to the lake. As a date. As in, I want to take you on a date.

I'm really really going to try to figure out how to call you so I can say this in better words.

Love,

Zag

P.S. I had to put this in the mailbox in the dead of night so Achilles & Pat didn't catch me and try to give me advice on what to say.

P.P.S. Pls continue to give Cerberus kisses from me!!!!

Notes for the Chapter:

And we have officially reached the end of the most goddamn niche fic I've written for Hades yet! Thank you for reading!!

Author's Note:

Find me on twitter for a lot more Hades @luddlestons!